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ABSTRACT

Evidence from research/evaluation studies indicates that the principles underlying law-related education (LRE) programs address the factors that put youth at risk for delinquency. Although rigorous evaluations of LRE are limited, what evidence exists suggests that LRE has potential to prevent delinquency and problem behavior. This digest discusses: (1) the connection between LRE and delinquency prevention; (2) the impact of successful LRE on delinquency prevention; and (3) future directions of LRE programs that address delinquency. The digest suggests that adopting additional characteristics of effective prevention programs to enhance the delinquency prevention potential of LRE should be explored. (BT)

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Law-Related Education and Delinquency Prevention

By Michelle Parrini

Evidence from research/evaluation studies indicates that the principles underlying law-related education (LRE) programs address the factors that put youth at risk for delinquency. Although rigorous evaluations of LRE are limited, what evidence exists suggests that LRE has potential to prevent delinquency and problem behavior (Caliber 2002). This Digest discusses (1) the connection between LRE and delinquency prevention, (2) the impact of successful LRE on delinquency prevention, and (3) future directions of LRE programs that address delinquency.

The Connection Between LRE and Delinquency Prevention.

Since the late 1960s, LRE has been implemented in schools and communities across the country to teach youth about law and justice. Characteristics of successful LRE programs are (1) a focus on essential LRE knowledge and skills; (2) judicious, balanced selection and presentation of issues and materials to ensure depth of analysis; (3) quantity of instruction sufficient to achieve desired change; (4) use of interactive instructional strategies; (5) opportunities for youth to interact constructively with resource persons; (6) active involvement and support of administrators; and (7) support networks for teachers/instructors (American Bar Association Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship 1995). These general characteristics of effective LRE are also applicable to programs designed to prevent delinquency (Caliber 2002).

A variety of factors put youth at risk for delinquency and other problem behaviors, such as:

- academic failure
- lack of commitment to school
- friends who engage in problem behaviors
- favorable attitude toward problem behavior
- early initiation of problem behavior
- low neighborhood attachment

These factors have been linked to substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school drop out, and violence (Caliber 2002).

Aspects of LRE that may protect youth against delinquency are (1) caring, support, and bonding; (2) opportunities to participate in decision making and planning and to hold positions of authority; (3) high expectations and rewards for behavior; and (4) clear norms for healthy behaviors (Caliber 2002). These protective factors build youth developmental assets and promote resiliency and successful adaptation to stressful events in the face of risk factors.

Resiliency consists of four major elements:

- social competence (characterized by empathy, caring, communication skills, and resistance skills)
- problem solving (characterized by critical reasoning skills, decision making, and planning)
- autonomy (characterized by feelings of efficacy, high self-esteem, sense of independence, and impulse control)

- sense of purpose and future success (characterized by planning and goal setting, delaying gratification, and belief in the future).

Programs that reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors to promote resiliency are most likely to prevent delinquency (Caliber 2002).

The Impact of Successful Delinquency Prevention Programs.

Several evaluation/research studies provide evidence of positive effects of LRE on delinquency prevention and youth development. This section summarizes the results of these studies, which are described in detail in *The Promise of LRE as Delinquency Prevention* by Caliber Associates, published in 2002 by the American Bar Association Division for Public Education. (This publication, Technical Bulletin No. 19, can be obtained by writing to the ABA National LRE Resource Center, 541 N. Fairbanks Court, Chicago, IL 60611-3314; by e-mail at <abapubed@abanet.org>; or by calling 312-988-5735.)

Through the use of interactive teaching strategies, LRE has potential to increase academic achievement; promote more favorable attitudes toward school, teachers, and schoolwork; and to inspire greater commitment to school. Youth who are attached or bonded to school and teachers and show increased academic performance are less likely to become delinquent. Program evaluations have demonstrated a relationship between LRE and improvement in classroom participation, enthusiasm for school and class, and regular attendance—all potential indicators of commitment to school.

Youth who participate in LRE demonstrate significant gains in knowledge of law and the legal process when compared to control groups of youth. This finding, coupled with studies that found a positive relationship between LRE and enhanced general academic performance, indicates that LRE is potentially effective for addressing academic failure.

Programs that set high expectations for youth, reward achievement, and help youth to develop positive beliefs and clear standards for healthy behavior have been shown to reduce risk of violence and other delinquent behaviors. These practices, allied with resiliency skills and positive bonding with prosocial adults, also contribute indirectly to risk reduction by reducing the chances of association with delinquent peers and, if initiated in early grades, by reducing the likelihood of early initiation of delinquent behaviors.

LRE effectively teaches belief in the rules governing behavior in the classroom, school, and community by demonstrating that rules and laws merit compliance when they are reasonable and fairly applied.

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LRE instructors determine the rules and expectations of the LRE classroom and instill belief in and commitment to them, often with youth participation. Instructors set high expectations for behavior and reward achievement through competitions and recognition ceremonies upon completion of most programs. Further, introducing resource persons in positions of authority as positive role models demonstrates healthy behaviors and enhances adherence to prosocial standards and social norms among students.

LRE also builds resilience by developing problem solving, critical thinking, and reasoning skills through challenging content and interactive strategies. Interactive strategies help youth develop purpose, independence, and autonomy. LRE's emphasis on young people as resources contributes to self-esteem and positive outlook on the future and builds political tolerance and perceptions of control of one's political freedom. Youth who participate in LRE learn a number of prosocial skills, including conflict management. They also demonstrate greater empathy for crime victims. LRE tends to improve several life-skills areas, including identifying problems, generating options, evaluating circumstances, reaching agreements and solutions, and communicating (Wright 1996).

Research on conflict resolution and violence prevention curricula has shown that teaching youth problem solving skills; dispute resolution, and other socially acceptable means for handling conflict can address the risk factors of early initiation of problem behaviors and association with delinquent peers. Some evaluations of LRE programs have shown a possible link between LRE and reduction of early initiation of problem behaviors. Youth who participate in LRE appear to have fewer disciplinary problems both in and out of school and have low recidivism rates (Brown and DeLapp 1995).

Service learning and other hands-on field experiences provide opportunities for youth to participate in prosocial activities using the skills that they have learned for prosocial interaction. Such experiences also tend to instill healthy beliefs and clear standards for youth.

Most LRE programs promote active citizenship among youth. Through hands-on interactive strategies, use of resource persons, and action or field projects, LRE students have opportunities to engage constructively with their surroundings and to promote the public good (Caliber Associates 2002).

Future Directions. Although rigorous impact evaluations of LRE programs are limited, the types of program strategies employed by LRE consistently appear to address risk factors and to contribute positively to resiliency-protective factors and delinquency prevention. *The Promise of Law-Related Education as Delinquency Prevention* (Caliber Associates 2002) concludes that future program planning and evaluation should more directly and pervasively address the links between LRE and delinquency.

Adopting additional characteristics of effective prevention programs to enhance the delinquency prevention potential of LRE should be explored. Possibilities include (1) early start and long-term commitment to LRE programs; (2) age-appropriate interventions; (3) strategies to address research-based risk and protective factors; (4) targeting at-risk youth; (5) evidence-based practice in every phase of a program; (6) interagency partnerships and community linkages; and (7) comprehensive approaches that combine various strategies and procedures.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in *CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE)*, are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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